

ENGINES OF LIBERTY

CARS AND THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

A Personal Essay

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*In memory of my father,
Florian Hanasz, a great car lover.*

In the United States and Western Europe, the role of automobiles in our lives has become a subject of wide, and sometimes even wild, debate. But I wish to examine automobility by looking at its role in Eastern Europe. My interest stems from the fact that I myself am from Eastern Europe, which in the 1990s has become a great laboratory of freedom, retesting and reusing some of the vital concepts of the Western world. To a Western audience, it is perhaps no news to learn that these concepts include liberal democracy, market capitalism, and the nation-state. More surprising, however, these basic Western concepts also include automobility.

OUT OF EASTERN EUROPE

Eastern Europeans have always loved to travel. Once upon a time they were free to do so; then times changed and they could not. Now times have changed yet again. Our grandparents told us stories from their student years before World War II, when a spontaneous hitchhiking trip from Warsaw or Budapest to Vienna and Paris was not unusual. Czesław Miłosz, a Lithuanian-born Polish poet and essayist, described his travels to “familiar Europe” as a significant part of his “search for self-definition.”² Miłosz described one such journey, undertaken in 1931, when he and his twentysomething friends visited the Colonial Exposition in Paris. They were free to go across Europe, from Lithuania and Poland to Germany and France.

Europe’s Communist regimes made such experiences impossible for my parents’ generation and my own. In most Eastern European countries, it was almost impossible to get a passport to travel west. It was very difficult to travel to any other Communist country as well. The Iron Curtain imposed a huge cage of

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¹ Many thanks to Ellen Frankel Paul and Sam Kazman for their patience and countless helpful comments.

² Czesław Miłosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-definition* (the original title is *Rodzina Europa*, which literally translates as “familiar Europe”) (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Co., 1968), pp. 148-149

immobility, and each Communist country was a smaller cage within that huge cage. Special permission was often necessary simply to travel within the Soviet Union.

Such bureaucratic restrictions did not succeed in wedging human nature into a Communist form. Independence of movement continued to be a deep value to most people living under Communist rule. It was no accident, for instance, that Soviet hockey players and chess players, Czech and Slovak tennis players, and Russian and Hungarian pianists, violinists, and conductors almost dominated the world with their skills and arts. The careers of athlete, scholar, intellectual, journalist, artist, or actor were hotly pursued in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe because they provided “a ticket to ride”—at least a fleeting illusion of autonomy and mobility.

These careers were neither very lucrative nor free from political barriers. In fact, scholars and intellectuals belonged to the least-paid professions and remained under the close scrutiny of Communist officials. Journalists, scholars, and artists were constantly censored. They were pressed to join the Communist Party or at least to express repeatedly their loyalty to the regime.

Most people were ready to swallow these bitter pills of humiliation in order to enjoy the occasional taste of freedom. Being an athlete, a scholar, or a journalist was a first step to acquiring some degree of mobility. While the price of a plane ticket from Warsaw to London or from Moscow to New York equaled an average worker’s annual salary, one could get that ticket from one’s tennis club, university, or journal. Sometimes the bitter part became too hard to stand. Thousands of athletes, diplomats, scholars, artists, and writers made the wrenching decision to choose freedom and to stay in the West, even at the price of leaving families and friends behind the Iron Curtain.

When the loosening of the Communist grip in certain countries made it easier to travel, the attractiveness of these quasi-free professions began to decline. Their attractiveness also was gradually overtaken, in part, by growing car ownership. It became enough to have four wheels to feel free. And one no longer needed to follow the routes and schedules directed by the Communist Ministry of Sports or the Ministry of Education.

In the 1960s, during the post-Stalinist “liberalization” of the Communist bloc, some Eastern Europeans could finally visit the streets of West Berlin, Rome, and Paris. Many Germans and Italians did not much like these visitors. The guests rarely spoke German or Italian, and their manners and attire were often laughable. They traveled with boxes and bundles full of clothes, camping equipment, tents, and canned food, because they were too poor to live in hotels or to eat in restaurants, and they tried to save money on everything. In order to cover some unavoidable costs, these tourists often entered the “gray market,” selling goods they brought, sometimes illegally, from their countries. One could buy from

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them a Polish ham or a bottle of Russian vodka or Hungarian “palinka” (plum liquor) at half price or even less.

As a by-product of these visits, Western Europeans became familiar with the unimpressive achievements of the Eastern automobile industry. The guests traveled in dirty, stinky, tiny vehicles hardly resembling real cars. Americans may find it hard to believe, but the infamous Yugoslavian Yugo that hit the American market some twenty years ago represented a relatively high quality product of the centrally planned economy. Most East European automobiles were of much lower standards. The most extreme case was probably the smokey East German Trabant, popularly called the “soap box” because of its plastic body and coarse shape. Other East European cars—Soviet Moskviches, Czechoslovakian Skodas, and Polish Fiats—were not much better.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION: THE IDOL OF COMMUNISM

This dismal state of affairs was not surprising. The Communist economy produced substandard cars because it had different goals. Until the 1970s, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe gave the production of trains, trucks, and buses priority over automobiles. Mass transportation was both an ideological symbol and the everyday reality of Communism. In the cities, buses and electric trams were the main means of transportation, while buses and trains were preferred for long distances. For decades, Communist decisionmakers saw no substantial need to develop a system of car production and service. Roads were in extremely poor condition. Highways practically did not exist. There were very few gas stations. It was hard to find a car mechanic. Other forms of service, such as car washes, were practically unknown. A car owner had to do practically everything for his car himself.

In some countries, Communist government policies were not just indifferent to the automobile but even openly hostile. Enver Hoxha, the Communist tyrant of Albania, Europe's poorest country, simply banned private cars. Of course, this made Albania even more economically handicapped and its living conditions fell below the lowest European standards. For the poorest Europeans, Albania played the role sometimes ascribed to the state of Mississippi in the United States: When any aspect of living conditions became unbearable, one could always cheer oneself up by noting that there was a place where things were even worse. Albanians themselves were known to jokingly compare themselves to cavemen.

Public transportation, especially the big city subway, was the apple of the rulers' eyes. In some cases, such as the Moscow and Leningrad subway systems, the amount of labor and financial means invested was mind-boggling. In the 1930s Stalin decided that the Moscow subway would be one of the crowning symbols of Communism. Not only regular construction workers but also thousands of Red Army soldiers, students, and other “volunteers” labored on the

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subway. Gulag laborers could hardly be brought to the very center of Moscow for this construction, but the work conditions were similar to those in labor camps.

The subway also illustrated the gigantism of Stalinist industry. In its monstrous fashion, it resembled the huge dams, endless canals, and enormous factories constructed all over the Soviet Union in those years. The Soviet Union's best artists composed the mosaics of marble and gold-leaf frescoes that adorn the major subway stations. At the huge Komsomolskaya station, ceiling compositions depict the most glorious moments of Russian history.

The overall aesthetic effect of this Communist art, however, is less than glorious. The brawny workers depicted in the "socialist realist" murals, and the lavish embellishments festooning the stations, clashed with the pitiful sights of everyday Soviet life. The monumental statues of idealized factory workers and collective farm workers hardly harmonized with real, bedraggled Soviet citizens. Golden domes and crystal chandeliers stood in sharp contrast to the gray faces and coats of Muscovite commuters. Thus, the hallmark of Communist art turned into its own caricature: an eclectic, ugly, discordant reminder of the miseries of life as the "new Soviet man."

As with many other monumental products of Communism, the Moscow and St. Petersburg subways were built with low technological standards. Several years ago, a 500-meter subway tunnel in St. Petersburg collapsed. The "highest achievements" of Soviet engineering are today in serious danger of succumbing to the frigid weather and muddy soil of northern Russia. In New York and Chicago, subway riders are often subjected to crowds, vandalism, and filth; in Eastern Europe, there is the added danger of falling concrete.

The Moscow subway's golden domes and crystal chandeliers contrasted with the gray faces and coats of Muscovite commuters.

CAR OWNERSHIP AS SOCIAL REBELLION

Despite all the efforts of Communist rulers, many Eastern Europeans doggedly resisted the anti-car policies of their governments. To have a car was a heavenly dream in the Communist era.

Because of the dismal inefficiency of the Communist economy and its animus against the automobile, the process of buying a car was radically different from and much more complicated than most other kinds of purchases. Automobiles often were simply unavailable on the market. They belonged to that pool of the most valuable goods, such as apartments and telephones, under strict control by the state.

In order to buy a car at an official price, one had to get a coupon allowing such a transaction. The coupon was a privilege available only to those who proved their utility and loyalty to the Party. Every year, the directors of big factories and

other governmental institutions, such as hospitals and universities, received several coupons to be distributed among their employees. The procedure, of course, invited sycophancy, corruption, and abuse of power. Not surprisingly, a director's relatives and friends were often the beneficiaries of his discretion.

Other buyers who did not pull the right strings to get coupons had to follow another procedure unique to Communism. A form of "reverse credit" took place, a credit granted not by the seller but by the buyer. The client had to pay at the outset a price much higher than the coupon owners and wait for several years for the car he already "owned." Usually, because of a high inflation rate, he also had to pay more and more before receiving the car. The differences among Eastern European countries were significant here. In Bulgaria and Romania customers waited longer than those in Czechoslovakia or Hungary to finally receive the car of their dreams. A ten-year wait was a rather optimistic expectation.

In the 1970s yet another procedure was introduced in some countries. Buyers could get their automobiles without waiting, but only after an additional prepayment in hard currency, usually around \$2,000, which was close to the car's official price in local currency. Thus, the Communist version of the "buy one, get one free" slogan was more like "buy three, get only one."

Regardless of the procedure, though, the prices of automobiles were truly outrageous. Even in countries where auto production was relatively high by Communist standards, such as Czechoslovakia or Poland, it seemed practically impossible for an average worker or administrative employee to scrape together a sum of money sufficient for a car. In local currency, the cheapest, tiniest Polish Fiat cost at least two years' wages. Some richer, self-employed people might be better off, but they constituted an insignificant minority.

From that standpoint, Warsaw's secondhand car market, regularly attracting buyers and sellers from all over Comecon (the Communist Economic Community), was an interesting place. Legally, only used cars were allowed to be privately sold, yet many brand new cars were easily found for sale here. The prices of these new cars could be three, four, or even five times as high as their official prices. Clearly some managers of the state distribution system were exploiting their access to new cars.

Those who planned to buy a car remained under severe pressure for years. All savings were put aside for the car, including additional money from part-time jobs. One of my friends, a professor of political science, went every summer to West Germany to work in a factory in order to add to his professorial salary so that he could buy a car. I knew people who saved up for years and were on many occasions close to reaching the final sum, and yet repeatedly fell short. Inflation of the local currency and the monopolistic policies for auto production made prices increase every year, and most people never attained the elusive prize. Among my relatives, more than half of their attempts to save enough money to buy a car failed.

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ENGINE POWER, IDEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING

Most theories explaining the sudden demise of Communism are highly unsatisfactory, and I do not intend to offer another one. However, certain economic, political, and cultural factors associated with the automobile encourage speculation about its role in the collapse of Communism. It is with only a slight sense of exaggeration that I call the sudden collapse of Communism in 1989-1990 an “anti-Communist revolution of car-lovers.” Let me try to explain how automobility contributed to this immense change.

First of all, the enormous, constantly growing, and constantly unmet demand for automobiles exposed the striking disparity between Communist ideology and the actual preferences of working people. Despite all the perils of the state’s control over car ownership—the corruption of bureaucratic allocation, the endless waiting lists, the high prices, and heavy taxation—most Eastern Europeans never abandoned their wish to have a car. Between 1970 and 1985, the number of automobiles in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe grew fivefold to almost 30 million. Although for the general population of more than 300 million the number of cars was small by Western standards, some social effects of car ownership still became visible. Most importantly, and paradoxically, while Communist governments continued their expensive investments in new subways and railroads, in some Communist countries the number of people using mass transportation actually started to fall. Somehow, mass transit did not satisfy the elemental need for mobility.

Some Communist governments finally tried to modify their policies to give the impression that satisfying their citizens’ automotive desires was a priority. In the 1970s, in response to growing consumer pressure, some Communist leaders tried to liberalize their regimes, especially in the economic realm. More refrigerators, TV sets, and washing machines appeared in East German, Polish, and Hungarian shops and apartments. More “cars for the people”—Czechoslovakian Skodas, German Wartburgs, and Polish Fiats—left assembly lines. In the 1970s, passenger car production more than tripled in less than ten years. Consumer pressure soon infected even the Soviet Union. In the late 1980s General Secretary Gorbachev’s *perestroika* put a strong emphasis on consumer goods, with the automobile near the top of the list, and there were plans to double or even triple car production to three or four million vehicles per year. Even that incredible progress, however, would satisfy no more than 20 per cent of total demand.

These attempted leaps into modernization and consumerism made the perverse inefficiency of the centrally planned economies even more evident. It became clear that these goals could not be achieved under central planning. Quantity was never adequate; in fact, it was horribly poor, especially when compared with Western products. No well functioning system of service and repair was developed in any Communist country. Eastern European automobile

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makers produced flimsy, third-rate cars. The Czechoslovakian Skoda could be considered one of the best brands and yet the word “Skoda” in Czech became slang for “what a pity.”

It became evident that, even if the Communist rulers were willing to care more about the needs of their people, they were unable to deliver. Communist propaganda failed to surmount a growing realization that the Soviet Union’s achievements in space and military technology, the very basis for the Communist camp’s alleged technological superiority, was in fact a thin facade covering a terrible backwardness.

The case of Poland is particularly illustrative. In the 1970s First Secretary Gierek promised better consumer goods, especially the Polish Fiat. Cooperation with Italian Fiat and other Western firms was supposed to mobilize the Polish economy, but this mobilization required huge infusions of cash, which Poland lacked. Gierek found Western banks only too eager to make loans to Poland. It did not occur to him that without serious decentralization and privatization his liberalization of the centrally planned economy was doomed to fail. It is even more baffling why it did not occur to Western banks that without economic reforms Poland would be unable to pay its debts. Huge sums were wasted or went into the pockets of government bureaucrats and local overlords.

After several years of artificial prosperity, the growing foreign debt resulted in a total collapse of the Polish economy. The years of prosperity ended with an unimaginable crisis. Not only cars and refrigerators but even bread and milk disappeared from the stores. The inflation rate rose so high that everyone tried to spend his money as soon as possible. Savings that people had gathered for years lost all value. Another glowing dream of Communism turned into a nightmare. The Solidarity movement of 1980-1981 was a wake-up call not only to Poles but to all East Europeans.

THE VEHICLE OF DREAMS

The attempts to modernize the Communist economy opened an important window on the world, with some powerful cultural consequences. The growing number of international contracts allowed more East Europeans to experience not only Western technology and efficient management but also Western lifestyles. The development of economic contacts made it possible for many Poles, Hungarians, and even Soviets to travel abroad and taste both Western political liberties and the material amenities of modern life. Western products, including cars, became extremely popular, and demand for them began to grow very fast, completely overshadowing uncompetitive local products.

Economic openness had a powerful snowball effect. The more East Europeans were fascinated with automobiles and other Western products, the more the Communist regime’s inefficiency became evident. The initial post-

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Stalinist attempts in the mid-1950s to “liberalize” Communism started a process that could not be stopped: more openness, more contacts with the West, more visions of a more prosperous life, more desires and dreams to satisfy. The Westernization of Eastern Europe started to accelerate.

There was, of course, precedent for this, some of it quite comical. When in the 1940s the Soviet authorities released John Ford’s film classic *The Grapes of Wrath* in order to show how the American capitalistic system mistreated displaced farmers, the reaction of the Soviet public was completely unexpected. Far from being appalled, Soviet viewers were envious; in America, it seemed, even the poorest had cars and trucks, and when they were driven off the land, they had a way to go and seek a new life. John Steinbeck’s story of hopeless poverty was seen in Russia as a message of hope and opportunity.³ Many people felt that cars could help them escape Big Brother’s control over every moment and movement of their lives. Freedom to drive one’s own vehicle became freedom to drive one’s own life when, where, and how one wanted.

The simple wish to have a car had deadly force against Communism. The process accelerated so fast that the policies of liberalization of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s—Dubcek’s in Czechoslovakia, Gierek’s in Poland, Kadar’s in Hungary, and, finally, Gorbachev’s in the Soviet Union—could not tame the rising tide of dissatisfaction and disobedience.

Ironically, it was Lenin himself who opened this “window on the world” when, in the early 1920s, he agreed to import assembly kits of Model T Fords as part of his New Economic Policy’s many concessions to effective production and trade. After that, despite all the efforts of official propaganda, the car industry became a special area, to some degree unavoidably free from governmental lies. Neither car makers nor car users ever questioned the self-evident fact that the car factories of Russia and Eastern Europe were far behind Detroit, Turin, and Nagoya. By signing yet new contracts with Western producers, Communist governments systematically acknowledged their technological and managerial inferiority. Most East European cars were based on foreign technologies, Italian Fiat being the leader; only Czechoslovakia’s Skoda made cars of its own design.

This expanding culture of automobility had a notable political effect. Luxury cars became symbols of the political system’s corruption, unfair privileges, and costly abuses. A cartoon by Andrzej Mleczko, a very popular and politically incorrect Polish cartoonist, illustrates this. The first frame, mimicking classic Communist posters, presents young people marching together with energy and vigor. Its subtitle is a popular phrase: “The new is coming.” In the second picture, limousines pass the young marchers. The men inside the cars look like Communist Party

³ Lev Navrozov, *The Education of Lev Navrozov: A Life in the Closed World Once Called Russia* (New York, Harper’s Magazine Press, 1975), pp. 364-365.

apparatchiks or Mafia dons, and they drink champagne and romp with playful blonds. Its subtitle: "The old are driving."

The cartoon hit a sensitive nerve. While the young idealists bravely tried to walk into the future, the old hypocrites enjoyed their money, luxury cars, and lavish lifestyles. While most Bulgarian, Romanian, and Soviet families had to wait for decades for the privilege of renting a tiny, gray apartment, receiving their own phone number, and buying their own car, Communist apparatchiks satisfied their wildest whims. There were legendary stories about the lavish lifestyles of Leonid Brezhnev, Erich Honecker, and Nicolae Ceausescu. The Romanian tyrant, for instance, ordered the construction of many posh houses for his relaxation and hunting. Some of the most attractive forest areas were reserved exclusively for him. His houses and hunting lodges were continuously maintained in readiness for his visits and protected by hundreds of secret agents. What was truly outrageous was that he never once visited many of these residences. At the same time, even a small two-room apartment was not always available for a family of five or six.

Cars were the most visible element of the prodigal lifestyle of the ruling Communists. While most of the legendary dachas and mansions remained hidden behind barbed wires and were invisible to the people, the elites' cars openly traversed the streets, kindling envy and hatred in their wake. City traffic in big cities was often stopped for hours because a cavalcade of the big bosses' black limousines was expected to pass. Some Communist leaders were so obsessed with the danger of terrorist attack that they usually ordered several routes to be reserved for them. Thus in many places traffic was blocked for hours and yet no car ever appeared. Party leaders' automobiles were unimaginable luxuries for commuters forced to wait and watch. Communists had exuberant and expensive tastes. East Germany's Erich Honecker, for instance, had seven cars, including a customized armored \$95,000 1988 Mercedes 560 SEC and a customized \$55,000 12-cylinder Jaguar XJC.

With pervasive irony, the cartoonist Mleczko suggested that those luxurious limousines were also the place where Communist apparatchiks learned about the outside world. In one of the cartoons, a passenger in such a vehicle talks to his chauffeur: "Tomorrow I am going to talk on TV about the situation of common people. Tell me, Henry, how are the common people doing?"

THE CHAINS OF FRIENDLY SLAVERY

For East Europeans lucky enough to have cars, almost every day reminded them of their humiliating dependence on the Soviet empire, which was also the empire of oil and gas. Officially, Soviet supplies were a part of international contracts and Comecon cooperation. However, Eastern European

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countries were not allowed to seek any other source of oil, and their economies were entirely dependent on a single Soviet pipeline called, ironically, the Friendship Pipeline. Everyone knew that the economic contracts were in fact the means of “friendly” blackmail and that Comecon cooperation was “friendly” slavery. Any crisis, whether economic or political, had immediate consequences in the amount of fuel available. During the 1980-1981 Solidarity movement, the Soviet threat of closing the tap was openly discussed in the media.

Of course, in the centrally planned economies, the needs of heavy industry always came before the needs of private buyers. Even a slight problem with oil supplies had immediate and dramatic effects on private drivers. People waited for hours at gas stations and gas prices jumped up, sometimes doubling overnight. The oil crisis that touched Western Europe and America in the 1970s was a permanent state of affairs under Communism. The ruthless Soviet monopoly left no hope for improvement.

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The fundamental conflict between public admiration for cars and the Communist governments’ hostility to that admiration was evident to all. During the decades of Communist power, it became apparent that government policies were inspired not so much by an abstemious ideology as by the rulers’ intention to constrain and control Eastern European societies. It seemed to be the presumption of Communist rulers that in order to control those societies, they had to limit all kinds of mobility. Even in such relatively liberal regimes as Poland, a simple trip to a friend could turn into a serious problem. Police had the right to investigate the aim of one’s travel, be it by car or train. When a person’s explanation was unsatisfactory, he could be held at a local police station. At times when the Communist rulers felt somehow vulnerable or jeopardized (the 1981-1983 period of General Jaruzelski’s martial law in Poland is a perfect example), such travels to a neighboring city were made completely illegal.

One of the greatest hits of Polish rock music in the early 1980s, “The Steam Locomotive for Sale,” presented an ironic vision of the sharp conflict between the public’s will to travel and the obstacles it encountered:

*I have read an ad;
Someone is selling a steam engine.
I’ll buy it! I’ll buy it!
Gasoline is so expensive;
My travel will be much cheaper.
I’ll pick up dry twigs! I’ll pick up dry twigs!⁴*

And so the song went, describing how all those countless fees, taxes, permits, and licenses could be avoided by buying and driving a steam engine!

⁴Lyrics by Zbigniew Holdys and his band, Perfekt.

Mass transportation was one of the tools that determined where and when people could travel. The railroad network between big cities was relatively functional, but to travel between more obscure places was often a tiresome adventure. It could take ten hours to travel one hundred miles from A to B because there was no direct connection. In big cities, public transportation was unreliable and often late. One could easily conclude that the Communist system of transportation was deliberately designed to waste as much of one's time as possible because people who spend hours commuting and waiting in lines have no time to rebel against the regime.

Yet Communist policies failed. In fact, their long-term effects were quite the opposite of those intended by policymakers. People spending hours commuting and queuing had enough time to realize how humiliating their lives were and to share their gripes with others standing nearby. Restrictions on automobility revealed the Communist regime's hopeless inefficiency, repulsive corruption, and hypocrisy. While the Communist parties in the West tried to prove the superiority of their political and economic theory over imperialistic capitalism, millions of people living under Communism every day experienced the system's injustice and unproductiveness. Easterners' growing awareness of Communism's ugly face was the pivotal reason for its ultimate fall, and automobiles contributed much to that process. Although Eastern Europe's "road from serfdom" was not a smooth highway, it surely was a road with many cars on it.

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AUTOMOBILITY AFTER COMMUNISM

There are two sides to the post-Communist reality of today. On the one hand, Communist political systems and ideology are dead or dying. The people of Eastern Europe finally enjoy political and economic liberties. Some Eastern Europeans indulge in fast food and fast cars. Others choose something else. Freedom to choose is what all of them enjoy. On the other hand, the post-Communist countries are in many ways limited by the material and cultural remnants of the old Communist world. Most people live in the same tiny apartments in gray, concrete blocks. Many factory workers still use the same outdated tools and machines. In their lives, they often follow the same outdated customs and habits.

Automobility exemplifies two facets of post-Communist life: its impressive progress and its frustrating backwardness. The bright side is remarkable. As one Western executive put it, "First comes Coca Cola, then a Shell petrol station, then a Rolls-Royce dealership and you are part of the league."⁵

⁵ Sally Bogle, "Invasions of the Market Snatchers," *Energy Economist*, August 1996.

East Europeans may not buy too many Rolls-Royces yet, but car ownership in Eastern Europe has exploded. In the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, automobile ownership in Poland doubled every ten years. In the 1990s, it has doubled every four years.

Auto production in Eastern Europe has also boomed, with many foreign car makers investing in and opening plants in Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere. This has meant not only new products for East Europeans, but new jobs as well. The freedom of the market for cars and the newly acquired freedom of movement seem to feed off each other. The car is no longer a sign of extraordinary wealth or social privilege. The irresistible allure and convenience of individual mobility has become familiar to everyone and affordable to more people than ever. More Eastern Europeans enjoy traveling abroad to visit relatives, tourist attractions, or favorite getaways.

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THE GHOSTS OF THE OLD REGIME

The darker side of the post-Communist reality is also striking, however. Old cars still dominate the Eastern European auto market and roads. More than 10 percent of cars in Poland are at least 20 years old.⁶ Communist central planning left much of the region's infrastructure in terribly poor condition. Existing road networks and parking structures have proven unable to handle the increasing volume of traffic. In most big cities, there are so few parking lots that haphazardly parked cars clog the streets. During rush hour, the level of traffic congestion in Bratislava or Cracow seems to be higher than in Chicago or New York. Commuters must know their cities very well in order to find which routes are usable.

The system of mass transportation is unable to satisfy the growing mobility of Eastern European societies. Communist mismanagement left much of the region's infrastructure in terrible condition. The policy of public subsidies required neither economic efficiency nor professional skill. Thus the fleet, facilities, and accessory equipment of urban transportation are usually dated or obsolete, suffering from frequent breakdowns, unreliable service, inefficient fuel consumption, and heavy toxic emissions. Most managers and operators are not familiar with modern management techniques and cost-recovery practices, and their old habits do not disappear easily. The managers seem to be familiar only with the old ways of solving their problems, demanding bigger budgets from the government and hiking fares as high as possible. Yet fare increases do not bring much improvement in service. As a result, users are increasingly dissatisfied and are moving to cars even faster than before.

Because of both the rapid growth of private car ownership and the lack of improvement in public transportation, the use of the latter is declining. Budapest

⁶ Krzysztof Golata, "Milosc do volkswagena," *Wprost*, 5 July 1998, p. 41.

and Prague, for example, have seen drops in public transportation use by some 15 to 25 percent in recent years. The great subway investments in Warsaw and Sofia have arrived much too late and seem to be typically Communist wastes of money.

The poor quality of public transport reinforces its bad reputation as a relic of the old regime. While private cars are often associated with newly acquired independence, mobility, and prosperity, public transport still represents old-fashioned sins: irrational policies, chaotic management, wasted money, and very little concern about customers' interests.

Here, too, the cartoonist Mleczko has something to say, based on real life experiences shared by many. A bus driver warmly greets his passengers on his public address system, wishing them a pleasant trip. When the microphone is off, he comments, "I have no idea why I am always so polite when I'm drunk."

A recent series of public transportation workers' strikes in Poznan, Poland, illustrates the state of affairs.⁷ The bus drivers union in Poznan announced the strike after its demand for higher salaries went unmet. The unionists tried to act from a position of sheer power, believing that traffic paralysis among the city's 600,000 inhabitants would force the city authorities to resign. They were right, but for several days only.

The authorities' efforts to provide substitute means of transportation, together with private initiatives led to a totally unexpected result. After initial chaos, the life of the city returned to its regular rhythm. Schools and employers did not experience more absences or delays. In trying to exploit their supposedly indispensable utility, the public transport workers discovered that they were easily replaced by small private firms and civic self-organization. The residents of Poznan discovered this as well, and the ultimate consequence of the strike will probably be a faster privatization of public transport in the city.

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PRIVATE VIRTUES, PUBLIC VICES

These two aspects of automobility in Eastern Europe create a clear pattern, a conspicuous difference between the private and the public. While the private participants of market competition represent examples of proficiency, professionalism, and prosperity, the public side exemplifies the opposite, often resembling old-fashioned Communist deficiency. Private car producers, gas and service networks, and even privatized mass transit do their part. There are more cars of various sizes and designs, more convenient equipment, more professional service and expertise available. The growing car market of Eastern Europe clearly shows the victory of competitive private firms over central planning. Customers know what they want, and they do not want old models produced by

⁷ Bartłomiej Lesniewski and Jacek Szczesny, "Choroba lokomocyjna." *Wprost*, 18 January 1998, p. 26.

regional producers. Formerly Communist factories, even those that are relatively efficient, such as Czech Skoda, have not been able to survive without new foreign investment or a total takeover by foreign firms.

The size of new vehicles is a hotly debated subject. Quite contrary to environmentalist propaganda, many Eastern European car buyers are starting to enjoy much bigger cars than those dominating European streets. On the streets of Prague and Cracow, just as on the venues of Paris and Rome, it may be easier to drive and to find parking in a tiny compact Fiat or Kia. But car owners also care about their safety and comfort. The tastes of East Europeans are becoming similar to those of American car owners.⁸ Bigger cars can save many lives, even if some Green experts do not like big vehicles.

Even the problem of pollution in Eastern Europe, despite its overwhelming complexity, seems to provide evidence of how private ownership solves problems. In the early 1990s, right before the Eastern European economy's transformation, one of the questions debated most loudly was the environmental outcome of massive privatization and decentralization.

Nations under Communism suffered many environmental disasters, so they know the danger very well. The horrors of Chernobyl had many kindred cases. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, areas as large as the state of New Jersey were turned into deserts because of Stalin's insane attempts to reverse the direction of rivers flowing into the Caspian and Aral Seas. In the Sudetes Mountains in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the level of sulfur and other poisonous gases was so high that trees died and no plants grew. Local life expectancy was almost twenty years lower than in other parts of Europe, and asthmatic attacks among children became common.

But contrary to some fears, privatization has brought more environmental benefits than dangers. Most private firms demonstrated more environmental responsibility than their public predecessors. In cities, too, more automobiles did not mean more pollution. Quite the opposite. Private car owners tend to care more about the quality of the cars they drive, the gasoline they use, and the air they breathe. They care much more than Communist apparatchiks ever did. People who can choose and afford Opels and Hondas no longer buy smoky Skodas and Ladas. The higher quality cars on the streets and roads of Eastern Europe mean less noise, lower air pollution, and more safety for everyone.

However, nothing would be more naive than to think that these impressive private achievements have positive consequences for the public infrastructure of road and rail transit. Eastern European car producers, car owners, and gas users

The growth of car ownership undermined one of the key elements of Communist ideology and practice.

⁸ The American perspective is presented by Sam Kazman in "Large Vehicles Are the Solution, Not the Problem," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 1998. For an Eastern European view, see Krzysztof Golata's "Milosc do volkswagena" in the July 5, 1998, *Wprost*.

pay high prices, taxes, and tariffs, but this money does not contribute to the construction of new highways, railroads, and bridges, nor does it help to keep old ones in good condition.⁹ Between 1993 and 1997 in Poland, for instance, not a single mile of highway was constructed.¹⁰ The infrastructure is literally disintegrating. Communist governments did not care about this infrastructure, and current governments, too, quite often insist that they must pursue other priorities. Eastern European drivers have good reason to be dissatisfied with both the past and present state management of the roads they use.

AUTOMOBILITY, AUTONOMY, AND PROPERTY

These observations about the Communist past and post-Communist present of Eastern Europe provide some powerful support for philosopher Loren Lomasky's claim that "automobile motoring is good because people wish to engage in it, and they wish to engage in it because it is inherently good."¹¹

Today, the number of Eastern Europeans enjoying the freedom to travel is immense. The German-Polish and Austrian-Hungarian borders seem busier than that between America and Canada. People cross these borders to shop or to buy cheaper gas or sometimes simply to hear a foreign language. As in the days of our grandparents, visiting neighboring countries has once again become a natural way to spend one's leisure time. Although many Eastern Europeans still suffer the material pains of economic transition, they think that the immaterial value of newly acquired mobility and autonomy is priceless. As Lomasky pointed out, "The value of automobility is strongly complementary to other core values of our culture, values such as the freedom of association, pursuit of knowledge, economic advancement, privacy, even the expression of religious values and affectional preference."¹²

But there seems to be even more to it than that. The growth of car ownership was a process that undermined one of the key elements of the Communist regime's ideology and practice, namely the abolition of private property. Communists understood that private ownership, as a form of one's sovereign dominion over a certain sphere of one's life, was a denial of their monopolistic rule. When an individual has the right to use, consume, lend, rent, sell, or even destroy something, the dominion of the state is seriously limited.

⁹ Adam Grzeszak, "Paliwo polityczne," *Polityka*, January 17, 1998, pp. 54-56.

¹⁰ *Wprost*, December 21, 1997, p. 44. To compare, the 1993 \$203 billion public works bill signed by President Clinton, which provided for improved highways and even new rest-stop toilets, must have looked like an impossible dream to Eastern Europeans. Cf. *The New York Times*, June 10, 1998, p. A17.

¹¹ Loren E. Lomasky, *Autonomy and Automobility*, Competitive Enterprise Institute, June 1995, Executive Summary.

¹² Lomasky, *Autonomy and Automobility*, p. 3.

Thus there was no property in land in Communist countries, with Poland as the single significant exception. It was almost impossible to own a small company. For legal and financial reasons it was difficult to own a house or apartment. Yet the institution of property as such survived. Despite those serious limitations, or perhaps because of them, people cared even more about their possessions. They had to live in public housing apartments, but they cherished family souvenirs, antique furniture, and the tiny plots of ground they were allowed to cultivate individually.

Automobiles became a vital part of this narrow margin of private ownership, a center of material efforts and cultural veneration. For many people, the prospect of owning something as big, costly, and useful as a car was a leading motivator to work hard at a second job or in the underground economy. Friends and neighbors competed to see who could reach the ultimate goal faster and more impressively.

Although Albania was the only country where private car ownership was prohibited, it was clear that other Communist governments did not like the cultural threat posed by the automobile. Yet what made the Communists truly suspicious of car ownership was the fact that a private car and its owner could become a one-man private company. From that point of view, car ownership was almost as unbearable as land ownership.

The independence of private farmers and private cab drivers made them not only very inconvenient but politically dangerous as well. They were the real “enemies of the state.” With their everyday efforts they proved that, despite all the obstacles created by the Communist regime, independents could survive and be far more efficient than most companies managed and subsidized by the government.

Farmers and cab drivers, my father among them, did not need to read Friedrich Hayek or Milton Friedman to know how to fight Communism. They resisted the Communist Leviathan’s permanent pressure with their entrepreneurship, initiative, and hard work. They proved in their everyday lives that private property was more beneficial for them, for their families, and for everyone else than collective ownership and central management.

Not by chance was Poland the country where the process of Communism’s demise began. Poland was the only Communist country where private land ownership, although restricted in various ways, was at least legal. Polish Communists were aware that private property was their main enemy. They lost, totally.

What made the Communists truly suspicious of car ownership was the fact that a private car and its owner could become a one-man private company.

THE PARADOXES OF PROGRESS

Most Eastern Europeans hope, and we should hope with them, that the old world will never return to life. Some recent developments are rather disturbing, though. The most Westernized countries of Eastern Europe face serious challenges to their free market economies and classic liberal values. Paradoxically, the challenge comes from the West itself. The European Community, which most East European countries hope to join, requires that its future members follow countless legal and economic requirements. These rules are extremely counterproductive for newly emerging market economies because quite often they mean new taxes, subsidies, quotas, and other violations of economic and political liberties. The Hydra of Socialism—Western Socialism this time—has shown another ugly head.

To enter the Western not-so-free market, Eastern Europeans will have to abandon some achievements of their free market transformation. The competitive prices that make some Eastern goods attractive in Western markets will have to go up because of bureaucratic regulations designed to discourage competition. Western European social security policies, labor laws, and environmental laws may jeopardize the Eastern European market. Some economists bitterly compare the limitations imposed by the European Community to the protectionist policies of the infamous Comecon.

Hopefully, the specter of Western European socialism will not overshadow the spirit of Eastern European liberty. Eastern Europeans waited too long and fought for their liberty and automobility too hard to cast it aside. Some of them are rediscovering the advantages of old ties. Some companies, beaten back by tough competition and sluggish economies in Western Europe, view some of their old East European partners as profitable and safe opportunities. This combination of East and West seems to be the true future of the region. And in a sense, such combinations, new and old, are what mobility is all about.¹³

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¹⁴ Robert Frank, "Roaring Back: Trade Is Bustling Again in the Old East Block," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 1997, Section A, p. 1.

